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## "MAKE-BELIEVE GRAMMAR" \*

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Richard Grant White's statement that "nearly all of our so-called English grammar is mere make-believe grammar"<sup>1</sup> has recently been quoted with approval by Professor Tolman, of the University of Chicago, in his interesting account of "The Revival of English Grammar."<sup>2</sup> By "make-believe grammar" both writers mean, as Professor Tolman states, the application of rules modeled upon those of the highly inflected Latin language to the facts of the English tongue, which is almost wholly uninflected. As conspicuous examples of such unwarranted borrowings from Latin grammar are cited the objective case of nouns and the agreement of finite verbs with their subjects. In both these instances we have in English no modification of form to correspond with the Latin nomenclature; yet the nomenclature persists, with the necessary result that insensibly the pupil comes to regard the English tongue as falling short at many points of the accepted standard. Any well regulated language will, it is assumed, modify the form of a noun when it serves as direct object of a verb and that of a finite verb to agree with its subject in person and number. Since English does neither of these things, so much the worse for English. And from such entirely reasonable inferences the pupil cannot but derive an essentially false conception of his mother-tongue, a conception undefined, unacknowledged, but no less real and permanent, that the English language is a kind of inferior or degenerate Latin.

This species of "make-believe grammar," however, is pretty generally recognized and need not detain us long. Professor Barbour in his admirable "History of English Grammar Teach-

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<sup>1</sup> *Words and Their Uses*, p. 304.

<sup>2</sup> *School Review*, February, 1902.

ing”<sup>3</sup> has indicated its source in the Latinistic conceptions of English held by our earliest grammarians and has traced at least the beginnings of its decline under the influence of the wider linguistic knowledge of their successors. Professor Tolman cites Jespersen’s *Progress in Language, with Especial Reference to English*, as competent authority for regarding the relatively uninflected English tongue as a stage, not in the deterioration or decay, but in the progressive evolution of language-structure. We are all theoretically at one upon this matter, it would seem, and though some details of reform demanded by the protestants may not be at once yielded by the practical teacher of grammar, the direction of our advance lies clear before us. English grammar must be presented as the formulated laws of *English* speech.

This essentially scientific attitude toward the facts of the English language is already exemplified to a marked degree in our modern treatment of questions of usage. Professors Brander Matthews and G. R. Carpenter, of Columbia University, Professor Scott, of the University of Michigan, and Professor Lounsbury, of Yale, have taught us that the old fashioned dogmatism of grammarians as to how people “ought” to speak is too commonly based on ignorance of the idiomatic peculiarities of our own language, of the past history of certain forms, or of present customs of speech outside a very limited circle. The more a man knows about any language the more clearly he sees it as a living, growing, changing thing; and the less willing is he to impose upon it an arbitrary legislation drawn from the usages of other tongues, from past usages of its own, or even from present usages not widely representative.

Both theoretically then, and in at least one notable point of practice, “make-believe grammar” of the type so far discussed in this paper has fallen into disrepute. There seems little room for doubt that it will eventually, and at no remote period, be superseded in every detail by a grammar which bases itself unequivocally upon the facts of the English tongue as English.

But the term “make-believe grammar” need not be confined to this fictitious structure of laws, terms, and definitions built

<sup>3</sup> *Educational Review*, December, 1896.

up by analogy from another language and without firm foundation in the facts of English speech. There is another species, no less figmentary than this, and in my judgment far more fundamentally misleading to the pupil; that grammar, I mean, which is derived not only from speech that is not English, but from speech that is not, in any genuine sense, speech at all. Our early grammarians, we allege, turned away their eyes from the facts of English speech and gave us rules drawn by analogy from the usages of the Latin tongue. But have not grammarians of all languages and all times, too frequently turned away their eyes from the facts of speech itself, from the language process as we understand it today, and given us laws from the dead and detached product of that process? If this be true, we have a fictitious construction in English grammar considerably more important as it is both deeper-lying and farther-reaching than the mere Latinizing of English.

Is it, however, true? Almost infallibly one is assured upon the first page of every textbook on English grammar that "language is a means of communication." And from this indubitable, though somewhat shadowy declaration, we should naturally expect to proceed by observing certain cases in which an idea is conveyed from one mind to another and analyzing the process as reflected in the language used. The office of various elements involved in this communication would then presumably be noted, and the elements defined on this basis. That is, one would analyze a sentence as the unit of language, to discover the parts of speech. But instead of this the accredited procedure up to a very recent date, both for textbook and for teacher, has been first to define the parts of speech in turn and then proceed to join certain of them together in such fashion as to make what was called a sentence. A noun, that is a word, representing a person or thing was prefixed to a verb, that is, a word standing for an action or a state of being, and behold a sentence! Thirty years ago pupils were not infrequently required to manufacture sentences after this method, of which a *reductio ad absurdum* appears in the following "direction"

taken from Reed and Kellogg's *Higher Lessons in English*.<sup>4</sup> "Unite the words in columns 2 and 3 below [auxilliaris appear in column 2, past participles in column 3] and append the verbs thus formed to the nouns and pronouns in column 1 so as to make good sentences." And the implication that this is the typical sentence-structure, that language is a mechanical aggregation of separate elements, appears continually in the definitions and rules current during this period. In his *Essentials of English Grammar*,<sup>5</sup> Whitney assures us that the parts of speech must be "joined" together, "in order to make a whole, in order to be speech." "For a sentence," he declares further, "there must be not only words of more than one kind, but words of certain kinds, *fitted together in certain ways*." (The italics are, of course, mine.) Nor can we "make a complete sentence without *joining together* a subject and a predicate."

There could be no more unequivocal statement of the conception of language as a mechanical aggregation of separate words. And I might quote interminably from Whitney's contemporaries, even, I regret to say, from some modern textbooks also, equally direct implications of this conception.

It is doubtless true that to the grammarian of an older generation there was no apparent inconsistency between this *e pluribus unum* conception of sentence-structure and the statement that language communicates the speaker's thought, since to the crude psychology which he had inherited from a still earlier time thought itself was "a thing of shreds and patches." One was, indeed, supposed to think first "house" and then "burning" and then put these two thoughts together before he could think—or say—"the house is burning." Granting this as a true account of the structure of thought, language might with entire consistency be described as a similar adding of word to word.

But we all know now, that whatever else this splicing of "percept" to "concept" may be, it is not in the genuine sense of the term "thought," any more than a leaf, a stem and a root tied together are a plant. The leaf, the stem and the root are

<sup>4</sup> Lesson 11.

<sup>5</sup> Chap. ii.

found in the plant as the ideas of house and burning are found in the thought that the house is on fire; but as the plant is a living growth, which has put out root, stem, and leaf, so the thought is an organic structure out of which its constituent ideas have developed. From a confused sense of something wrong perhaps as one suddenly wakes out of sleep, grows the single thought of the whole situation, namely, the house's being on fire, in which neither the house as such nor the act of burning as such have any separate existence. The thought is, in truth, one before it is many. The growing plant or animal is its fair analogy, not the mosaic or the stone wall.

This organic conception of thought the present generation of English grammar teachers have gained from psychology and from real logic. And further, all that we know of the structure of language from modern philologists and students of literature goes to show that it, too, is a living, growing thing, not in any sentimental or remotely analogical sense, but as sober, scientific fact. The sentence which is spliced together out of the "parts of speech" is, in truth, no sentence at all. It is not language any more than a company drill is fighting, or a scarecrow a man. Thought which is living, growing, organic in structure, cannot be conveyed or represented by a lifeless, static, artificial construction. Nor are we studying language by studying such a construction. The sentences which grammar presents to us have in very truth ceased to be language, once they have been cut off from all reference to the various acts of thought-communication which gave rise to them, so that they seem to exist in and for themselves, mere mechanical congeries of words, brought together only to fulfil certain arbitrary requirements of the sentence form as such.

That an artificial conception of the sentence similar to this, and directly at variance with our best knowledge of its nature and structure at the present time, has conditioned much teaching of English grammar in the past, seems to be indubitable. And that this false conception has actually been conveyed to pupils through their study of English grammar I also believe. A

priori we should, indeed, expect it to be so. The mind of the child is extraordinarily sensitive to the images latent in our phrases. Professor Scott's paper on the "Figurative Element in Grammatical Terminology"<sup>6</sup> discloses some quite unforeseen conclusions drawn by the young pupil from the uses in grammar of such supposably abstract and wholly technical terms as "case," "agree," "govern," "decline." And it is hardly conceivable that he should be insensitive to the suggestions of mechanical aggregation offered by such words as "joined with," "fitted together," "added to," "put with," "put together with," or "put along with," which in the older textbook are continually applied to the relations of words with one another in the sentence.

The expectation, moreover, that images of sentence-structure, as mechanical rather than organic, must inevitably be carried by language of this sort, has been abundantly confirmed by such data upon the subject as I have been able to gather for myself. From time to time during the past few years I have taken occasion to inquire into the ideas of language-structure and function actually carried away by children from their study of English grammar. Students in both high school and college have written for me at various times answers to the following questions: "What image (or picture) stood for the sentence in your mind after you had first studied grammar in school? What did you then think a sentence was for?" Though many pupils were of course conscious of no definite image, and many saw the sentence always in terms of the formal diagram they had been taught to use, the remaining answers all but invariably indicated both an artificial conception of sentence structure and a complete dissociation of the sentence from any purpose other than that of serving as a grammatical exercise. The picture suggested might be a string of beads, a line of wooden blocks, a train of cars, a card-house, a square of crazy patchwork; but it was almost invariably a whole made up of separate things put together in a certain way. And these things were put together, not in order to express an idea to someone else, but simply to—why, to make

<sup>6</sup> *Leaflet No. 36*, published by the New England Association of Teachers of English.

a sentence! "It was built up by somebody," says one student, "just as a block house might have been—for no purpose but to pull it down again." "I never thought a sentence was for anything but to study," sadly remarks another; while a third volunteers the admission that, though "a sentence in grammar" seemed to her as a child, like a square of patchwork, she does not think of "a real sentence" in this way—"one that comes in my reading, I mean." This pointed distinction between "a real sentence" and "a sentence in grammar," has been repeatedly implied in the statements of different pupils, and seems to me worthy of serious consideration.

Such inquiries as this are no doubt relatively unimpressive to anyone who receives them at second hand; but I believe that any teacher who, without prejudice, undertakes a similar line of investigation for himself, will come upon some astonishing and not insignificant revelations as to the vestigia left in the child's mind from his study of English grammar. Most convincing of all, to me, upon this point, however, are the unconscious betrayals to the teacher of literature or composition of a pupil's unrecognized sense of language as dissociated from the living thought process, an artificial structure of mere words for no end save that of meeting a requirement or "showing off" one's skill. Sometimes in such cases the source of this idea of language seems to lie back of any larger study of writing or literature in some obscure but persistent image, finally traced to the pages of the grammar textbook or to the lips of the grammar teacher, an image of the sentence as a "made-up" thing, consisting of words put together to form a certain pattern or to exemplify a given rule. Such a deep-lying, inwoven conception, as many of us know, goes not out by prayer or fasting. Only the expulsive power of a new and truer image will avail; and upon the task of making an entrance for such an image into the preoccupied mind, presenting it again and again, etching it deeper and deeper over the lines of the old picture—upon this task, sometimes seemingly hopeless, many teachers of composition and literature are today expending their best efforts. No real writing, no real



reading can be done by the student until works become to him direct and genuine expressions of thought. But surely all this labor to restore a vital significance which need never have been lost, is an indefensible waste in education.

It is only fair to say, however, that year by year such cases as this become fewer, in my own experience at least. And they would reach the vanishing-point within a college generation or so, if only our growing sense of the fatuity of teaching a pupil in English grammar ideas of language which must be with infinite difficulty unlearned when he studies composition and literature could be reinforced by an unerring choice of means for imparting to him the truer and more permanent conception of language as organic. This last is, indeed, the crux of the practical situation. Since the reign of W. D. Whitney and of Reed and Kellogg in the field of English grammar we have unquestionably advanced several steps in the direction of teaching the actual structure of language; but the tale is not yet fully told. Many of our recent textbooks strive, with varying success, to keep the "real sentence" and the sentence of grammar from invidious separation in the pupil's mind. They forbear to require the manufacture of imitation sentences, according to a formula furnished by them. Instead of "building" sentences to order after this fashion, they rather study such sentences as grow naturally out of the student's own thought or such as easily communicate to him the thought of another person, and hence become vicariously his own. These sentences are not mere puzzles, combinations of words in a certain pattern. They exist to convey thought, and do convey it to the pupil, since it is thought of a type which either is already or readily may become his. And at least the vanguard of our grammar teachers at the present time see that whether the pupil himself actually makes the sentence or whether it is suggested to him, he does not study its structure until it is to him a living sentence, a real expression of thought.

The modern textbook and the modern teacher, moreover, insist upon studying the parts of speech as derived from the sentence, not the sentence as made up from the parts of speech.

They attempt, at least, to define each part of speech by the actual service it renders in conveying the thought of the sentence as a whole, rather than as merely representing some particular class of things in the world. This is a little fire, but it kindles a great matter. Verbs do, no doubt, in the realm of words, roughly correspond to actions or "states of being" in the world of things, nouns to persons or things, adjectives to the qualities of persons or things, prepositions to relations between persons and things, and so on. But to define a verb, a noun, an adjective, and a preposition in this way is certainly to give color to the mechanical conception of sentence-structure. Join a person or thing to an action, a quality to the person or thing, a relation to another thing, and the two to the action, and you have a thought. In the same fashion unite a noun with a verb, an adjective with the noun, a preposition with another noun, and the two with the verb, and behold the language-structure corresponding to the thought. Such is the implication of these definitions. If, however, the subject as a whole has been first distinguished from the predicate as a whole, on the basis of the different function each performs in conveying the thought of the whole sentence, if then each part of speech is similarly discriminated from every other on the basis of its office in developing further any element of the thought, the adjective, for instance, being defined by virtue of its function as particularizing in various ways the meaning of a noun or pronoun, an adverb as discriminating the precise manner or conditions of the action indicated by the verb—if, in short, a vivid sense of the *activity* of the whole sentence and of all its parts in the communication of thought underlies every definition and rule, we have at least an honest effort to deal with real language and to represent it as it is.

Attempts of this sort are certain to be faulty in detail until we have become more completely interpenetrated than any of us can be as yet with the functional conception of the sentence. But they serve at least to point the way of our advance in the rational and scientific teaching of English grammar.

We know that the study of English grammar has long since

ceased to justify itself as a practical art. It has been pretty thoroughly demonstrated in experience that by parsing words and memorizing rules children do not learn to speak and write correctly. There remains, then, to the subject, only such justification as it may fairly claim on grounds of being a science, the theoretic formulation of the laws of the English language within the limits of the sentence-form. But this justification is surely imperiled by the charge of unscientific method and conclusion brought against it by students of comparative philology, in their contention that English grammar treats and represents the English language not as English but as a hybrid or deteriorated Latin. And still more conclusively we must admit does English grammar forfeit its justification to a place in the curriculum of studies as the science or theory of the English sentence, if it continues to treat its subject-matter in a fashion essentially unscientific, averting the eyes from the facts of genuine speech and writing, to analyze instead a fictitious construction of its own; if it studies and presents to pupils, in lieu of the living language, an artificial substitute manufactured by the grammarian and without real existence or usefulness in the world; if it holds and conveys to students false conceptions of the English language not only as English but also as language itself. This is "make-believe grammar" in its deadliest aspect. Until we have done with it entirely we cannot begin to enter into the possibilities which real grammar offers to education in these present days.

A word only in conclusion as to these possibilities. If we pass in review the great tendencies and achievements in education for the past half-century, we may note one principle as common to them all—the principle, namely, of displacing a formula by an activity, second-hand by first-hand knowledge. The laboratory method in natural science thus substitutes the pupil's own drawing of inferences and formulation of laws for his acceptance of them ready-made as the products of other people's observations and induction. He sees, traces out, controls, and analyzes the processes giving rise to the formulæ which once he merely memorized from the pages of a book. And

wherever the experimental method has obtained, even in subjects once regarded as insusceptible of scientific treatment, such as psychology and history, the observation of activities has supplanted the mere learning of the results of these activities.

In manual training we have a further instance of the transmutation of dead fact into living action. Those facts and principles of measurement, calculation, physical properties, which were once given directly to the student as rules or formulae to be learned, are now encountered by him as he follows step by step some active process in which they are involved. He thus grasps them more readily and retains them more easily, since they represent to him the living conditions or results of an activity which he has himself witnessed or carried on.

Of similar significance is that interesting type of primary education which uses the primitive industrial processes, such as pottery making, weaving, iron and metal work, not only to train the eye, the hand, and the mind of the pupil, but to afford him some insight into the complex social organization of which he is a part. By following out these processes from their crude beginnings to their complicated development in the present industrial order, the child is believed to gain not only a vital and thorough knowledge of the facts and principles incident to them throughout their evolution, but also some comprehension of those infinitely tangled and multitudinous activities which constitute the world's life, but which to those of us not thus initiated are usually little more than a "big blooming buzzing Confusion."

With the relative values of these various educational movements we are not now concerned. Our interest is wholly in the coincidence of their animating ideas, a coincidence which can hardly be regarded as purely accidental. Beneath innumerable differences of superficial aspect, these three noteworthy tendencies in modern education are rooted in the same elementary principle, namely that the products or results of an active process can be rightly understood and strongly seized upon by the human mind only in connection with that process.

Within the field of language-study, moreover, this principle

has to some extent already obtained. The historical and the comparative study of languages and literature is in fact built upon it. Our teaching of English composition has for several years paid tribute to it. In English grammar, last of all, we are beginning to recognize it. In this subject, therefore, we have yet to receive the returns which its completer acceptance and more consistent carrying out have elsewhere yielded.

These returns are so far conceded that I need only enumerate them. The laboratory method, manual training, the study of social and industrial activities, the organic or functional study of languages, of literature, of English composition, restore to dead forms, detached facts, meaningless laws, the color, the life, the significance which they have lost through separation from the activities which gave them birth. Such restoration will assuredly take place in grammar—has indeed already taken place wherever the organic conception of language has entered into it.

When we have at length dismissed entirely from our teaching that artificial product of the grammarian's ingenuity which I cannot forbear characterizing as "near-language," and set our pupils in earnest to studying the language process by direct analysis of the sentence-activity, we shall find this subject richer in its opportunities than any of us has conceived. In the first place the language process is not, like weaving or pottery making, obsolete in our modern households. It is at hand whenever and wherever one wants it. It is carried on by every child without self-consciousness as an essential activity in his daily life. It may be studied without elaborate apparatus of any kind. Since it involves abstract relations, without that actual manipulation of material substance characteristic of the industrial processes, it should doubtless not be the earliest activity studied by the child; but we must not on the other hand forget that when every language relation is consistently referred to the concrete reality behind the words, intelligent dealing with it becomes comparatively easy even for pupils in the lower grades.

But beyond its extraordinary availability, the language process has a second and quite incommensurable advantage over any

other process as a subject for study, in its unrivaled importance to the social order. If it is held advisable that the young student should understand certain industrial processes, that he may thereby gain some insight into this complicated modern world of ours, he should assuredly to this same end apply himself to that great process of communication by language between man and man, through which alone the individual can put his knowledge and thought at the service of his fellows, through which alone society can profit by the achievements of its members.

It is with this act, rightly understood, that grammar has to deal, not with mere words printed on the page. And in so far as it studies this act at first hand, observing and analyzing it as communication, as the living transference of thought from mind to mind, creating thus and shaping to its ends the sentence form—in so far may it be accounted real grammar.